Diocesan priests confront pre-election challenges



“We have been talking about this among the staff for almost a year, about how we want to be preaching, teaching, and offering formation opportunities,” says the Rev. E. Suzanne Wille, rector of All Saints, Chicago.

At All Saints, that translates into monthly programs with well-known speakers, community conversations, and small-group discussions focused on the intersection of faith and public life, as well as neighborhood walks that focus on how God is at work in the streets, homes and business around the church.

All Saints will be open all day on Election Day and will host a meditative service to create “a place of calm in the midst of what might seem kind of crazy” before the returns come in, Wille says. “It could feel pretty apocalyptic out there.”

As November 5 draws closer, preachers also need to prepare their congregations for a world beyond Election Day, especially if their candidate does not prevail. Wille at All Saints has given this a lot of thought.

“I am always trying to balance the possibility that the situation could be horrifying with the promise of God,” she says. “. . . in the middle of horrible things we can thrive … can have a moral center and live lives of integrity and meaning.”

Lately, she’s been using the word refugia, which she encountered in the writings of Debra Rienstra of Calvin College. “After the great scarring of the landscape in the wake of natural disaster, there are little pockets of life and thriving,” she says. Those pockets are called refugia.

“And little pockets can grow and thrive,” she says. “They can spread out over the whole area.”

Not every parish is as politically conscious as All Saints, but the question of what to preach and whether to preach on the election is one that confronts everyone who takes to the pulpit between now and November 5. And the response to those challenges can depend on the particular chemistry of the individual preacher and the context in which they find themselves.

The Rev. Megan Miller learned last year, during the rector search process that brought her to St. James the Less, Northfield, that the parish prided itself on its "political inclusivity."

"A consequence of creating a politically inclusive culture where finding common ground is the priority is that people avoid political conversations completely," she says. "Sometimes it comes up in one-on-one conversations, but not very often in group settings."

In her first months at the parish, she "inadvertently caused folks to feel alienated," Miller says, "not realizing that a formation opportunity I suggested or a word I used could be considered political."

Miller attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City, one of the more progressive seminaries in the mainline Protestant tradition where she took a class with James Cone, the father of Black liberation theology. But she does not sense a call to insert her own political views into her preaching at St. James.

"I want people to leave church feeling fulfilled and connected to God," she says. "I don't want to purposefully make anyone angry and definitely do not want anyone to feel ashamed or guilty. I've witnessed people with all kinds of politics be good Christians who share their time and talent, act lovingly in the community, and embody Christ's teachings to the best of their ability."

She remembers Cone saying that during the civil rights movement everybody had their place and that his was in the library. Hers, she believes, is as a reconciler.

"I feel more called to the work of unity and loving one's neighbor … and also quelling some anxiety in the system," she says.

"With so much self-righteous judgement in the air, I want to avoid adding to it," Miller says. "Finger-pointing ultimately hurts both the one on the giving and receiving end of judgement. What feels like a deeper spiritual need in our country right now is compassion, understanding, and trust in God."

Like Miller, the **Rev. Fulton Porter, rector of St. Thomas, Chicago**, a historically Black congregation, has a keen sense of his congregation's concerns, but it leads him in a different direction. "What I realize is that there are times where a hot button issue comes up or something is really brewing where it seems it would be malpractice not to address it from the pulpit," he says, "where you would seem to be catatonic or tone deaf at best."

Porter has served St. Thomas's since 2005. "The beauty of a long tenure at a congregation is that you really get to know your people," he says.

One place this happens is Bible study. "It's a different venue where we are able to talk, and I get a conversational view of exactly where they are and what they feel and the sadness they are experiencing," he says. But, he adds, "even if I were preaching to a roomful of strangers, I believe what tickles me tickles them as well."

When it comes to preparing a sermon, Porter says he holds the Bible in one hand and social media in the other, an updating of an old adage attributed to the famed theologian Karl Barth, who is said to have spoken of newspapers, rather than Facebook or X.

"I like to listen to the lection (appointed readings), and see where this can be applicable," he says, "but most of time because there is a central theme in the Bible that relates to love and justice, we can always bring current events into what we are speaking about on any given Sunday. … The themes in general are universal."

The hard part of his job, he says, lies not in inspiring people or moving them to action, but in keeping their spirits up in difficult political times. "How do we elevate the people out of their sadness or hopeless state to this kind of sunrise moment of the fact that there is hope on the horizon?" he says. "That is the emotional labor that I have. Because you have to be a peddler of hope."

At **St. Michael and All Angels in Berwyn**, a primarily Hispanic congregation, **the Rev. Jaime Briceño** says he has little choice but to preach about political issues.

“If we are people that live in the world with everybody else, and we realize that people, our parishioners, come to church trying to find comfort and peace, the worst thing I can do is to give them the impression that God doesn’t care about the things they care about,” he says. “All the controversial issues they care about, that are out in the news, that they are putting on social media or what not, they need to know that God cares about that as well.

“The worst thing we can do is act like the politics of the moment don’t affect people and if you think the politics of the moment don’t affect you, that speaks of a tremendous privilege because the most affected people are those at the bottom.”

Avoiding political subjects is not only unwise, but increasingly difficult, he says. “‘Respect the dignity of every human being,’” he says, quoting the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church. “That is not a neutral statement. Accepting everyone for who they are regardless of color or national origin, that is a partisan statement in the politics of today.”

Briceño says he never mentions political candidates by name in his sermons. “There is an Ecuadorean song that doesn’t name the evil you are fighting in the song,” he says. “It is always ethereal and unnamed. By naming it you give it a power, so you don’t give it power.

“My take,” he says, “is that if we look at our Christian values and we are honest about our Christian values the political choices should be clear, and if we are unclear about it, it is because of our Christian values and we need to revisit those.”